



*Journal of
Religion & Society*
Supplement Series

The Kripke Center

Supplement 10 (2014)

The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor

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11. Challenging the Status Quo

How Rutilio Grande, S.J. Used Scripture to Address Socio-Economic Inequality

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Introduction

On March 12, 1977, shortly after five o'clock in the afternoon, a Volkswagen Safari left a small town in El Salvador known as Aguilares, a small dusty town roughly an hour north of the capital of San Salvador. In the vehicle were three people – an elderly man named Manuel Solorzano, a fifteen year old boy named Nelson Lemus, and a Roman Catholic priest named Fr. Rutilio Grande, SJ. On the way out of town, near the train tracks, the vehicle stopped to give three small children a ride. Their destination was the town of El Paisnal, roughly three miles away, to which Fr. Grande was travelling to continue a novena in celebration of the town's feast day. As the bell was tolling to gather the people near the small church situated in the central plaza of El Paisnal, Fr. Grande and his entourage made their way along the narrow dusty road that connected Aguilares and El Paisnal. "Rutilio liked the people already gathered when he arrived" (Cardenal: 573). As they passed the small village of Los Mangos,

the children saw groups of two or three men on the banks of the small canals on either side of the road. Behind the VW was a small pickup truck that had followed them from Aguilares. In a low voice, Fr. Grande is quoted as saying, "We must do what God wants" (Cardenal: 573). As the pickup came closer to the VW, a hail of bullets fell from the sky, impacting the car. Later, a doctor who examined the bodies indicated that Fr. Grande was killed by bullets coming from both the front and rear of the vehicle. The weapons and ammunition used were common to the local police. Bullets from the front hit Fr. Grande's jaw and neck and penetrated his skull. Bullets from the rear and left shot through the lower back and pelvis. Altogether, he was hit by twelve bullets. When the bodies were found it appeared that seventy-two-year-old Manuel Solorzano tried, in vain, to protect Fr. Grande, as his body completely covered him. "Nelson sat quietly in his seat with a bullet in his forehead" (Cardenal: 574). The three children who had been given a ride were screaming in the far back of the vehicle. A man they did not recognize ordered them to leave. Full of panic they passed by the bodies of the three others, not even seeing them. As they ran toward El Paisnal, they heard one final shot; covered in blood and dirt, they did not stop running until they had arrived in El Paisnal.

The three bodies were placed in front of the altar in the church of El Paisnal and the Jesuit provincial asked that a liturgy be offered that "gives hope to the community and avoids the temptations to hatred or revenge" (Cardenal: 575). At ten-thirty that same evening, Archbishop Romero presided over mass, which lasted until midnight. The next morning, responding to a radio announcement by the archbishop, streams of peasants began walking into El Paisnal for a nine o'clock memorial Mass. They came from near and far to mourn the death of their beloved priest and his friends. The next Sunday, Archbishop Romero declared a "single Mass," a memorial mass for Rutilio Grande, as the only mass to be offered in the country. During the final funeral procession, one that would ultimately inter these bodies in the floor of the church in El Paisnal directly in front of the altar, the slogan could be heard: "Rutilio's walk with El Paisnal is like Christ's journey with the cross (Carranza: 104).

Fr. Rutilio Grande's death, as described in detail in the preceding paragraphs, leaves the reader with some very serious questions. How could powerful forces within the overwhelmingly Catholic country of El Salvador both plan and execute the death of a Roman Catholic priest and two innocent people in broad daylight in front of witnesses? Why would this same government deepen its confrontation with the Catholic Church until thousands of lay ministers, dozens of priests, and even the archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, were murdered? What about the church and its ministry was so threatening to the government? Why would the government, and the oligarchy that supported it, believe it necessary to repress the church in such a brutal manner? (Kelly: xi-xv).

To gain insight to even provisional answers to these questions, it is necessary to first understand the general situation in Latin America in the 1960's and 70's. Second, it is important to know something about the life and ministry of Rutilio Grande, S.J. and his commitment to the poor of El Salvador. Finally, it is necessary to understand the new way in which Vatican II was implemented in the context of El Salvador, especially how scripture was used by Fr. Grande in his ministry. In light of these considerations, it becomes evident that the use of scripture as the foundation of ministry challenged the oligarchy of El

Salvador and resulted in Rutilio Grande S.J. giving his life in the effort to build the Kingdom of God.

The Reality of People in Latin America

In December of 1975, Archbishop Leonidas Proaño published an article in *Búsqueda*, the journal of the Pastoral Commission for the archdiocese of San Salvador, titled “The Role of Christianity in the Process of Development.” The article is divided into three sections respectively titled, “The Reality of the People of Latin America,” “The Christian Message of Liberation,” and “Christian Engagement and Development.” Proaño first recognized there were two types of believers in Latin America, and therefore two churches. The first were the elites of Latin American society, or the oligarchy, described in the following:

. . . traditional conservatives [who] have made a *separation between their faith and social responsibility*. The faith, for them, is adherence to a creed and clear, determinate moral principles. This type of traditional faith is especially conscious of one’s status in the church, and they want to serve their own social, economic and political interests (7, emphasis in the original).

On the other side of this is what Proaño terms, “revolutionary faith.”

Revolutionary faith is more than a personal relationship with God, it is a social responsibility. For this group, actions of service to one’s neighbor substitutes for prayer and liturgy. Their crisis of faith emerged when they do not see the hierarchical Church seriously committed to social problems and the poor (8).

The danger for this group was the temptation to abandon the church and, out of frustration, embrace Marxist movements. Finally, among the elites there was a small group between these two oppositional movements whom Proaño named “developmentalists.” Their problem was a growing religious indifferentism.

For the vast majority of Latin Americans – the poor common people – Proaño saw a type of popular religiosity which understood the Christian faith as “deformed and mixed with native religious practices where the Christian faith becomes almost tyrannical; there is the danger of being influenced by superstition and magic which reveal something utilitarian but also a fear of the divine” (8). When pagan influences, especially from nature religions, become mixed with Christianity, faith became hostile to human existence. At the same time it was recognized that these popular manifestations “emerge from authentic religiosity, and can be expressed through culturally appropriate elements which are available” (Proaño: 8). Questions of enculturation and syncretism were, and continue to be, extremely difficult cultural challenges to evangelization in Latin America. This brief overview of the peoples of Latin America and their religious orientation illustrates an awareness of the great variety and complexity of religious identity in this region.

According to Bishop Proaño, a critical problem in Latin America was the greed of the upper social classes. “The dominant social sectors have not hesitated to use all the means at their disposal to exploit humanity. Not only are they made wealthy by the cost of work, of hunger, of the suffering of the great majority but they have also maltreated and oppressed

through their words and actions. They have taken away the benefits of culture, they have oppressed, they have repressed, and they have dehumanized” (10). What deeply concerned Proaño was the poor’s fatalism resulting from what he termed a “psychology of oppression.” Events were attributed to the will of God because there was no hope or any sense of effective human agency in the world. Without these two components, there was no vision for how the world could be transformed. “They begin to believe that it is the will of God that established the existence of rich and poor, and for this reason, nothing can be done to change unjust structures. It is fatalism” (8).¹

Rutilio Grande

Rutilio Grande was born July 5, 1928, in El Paisnal, El Salvador, the youngest of six children. When he was four years old, his parents separated and later divorced. For financial reasons, his father left El Salvador to look for work in Honduras, and Rutilio was effectively raised by his older brother and grandmother. Due to the separation of his parents, the family went from a position of relative stability in the community to deep poverty in a short period of time (Cardenal: 22-23). His oldest brother, Flavio, assumed responsibility for the household and, together with his siblings, worked a small plot of land where they planted corn, beans, and rice – the staples of survival in El Salvador. The three acres the children farmed was insufficient to meet their needs. Like so many other rural peasant families, they were poor and rented another piece of land to augment their meager production. The typical obligation for the use of land was a bushel of corn per 1.5 acres in addition to delivering five hundred sticks of firewood to the landowner’s home – the equivalent of one week of work out of a month. According to the only Spanish biography of Rutilio, this system of payment was one of many mechanisms of exploitation used against poor peasants. “Many times what was required by the owner of the land exceeded half the production. This type of arrangement was due to competition between the many landless families who were forced to accept any agreements with the owners of the land available so as to secure a plot to ‘get by’” (Cardenal: 24).

After leaving El Salvador for a time in the late 1950’s and through the 1960’s for training as a Jesuit, Rutilio returned to a country deeply fragmented by inequality with a severely divided Catholic church. A brief overview of that church is necessary to understand how he chose to move forward in his ministry.

A Divided Church

The Church of El Salvador was led by Archbishop Chavez y Gonzales for more than 30 years. He was a progressive-leaning leader who embraced the reforms of Vatican II in a country where the Church had been allied with the oligarchy since the Spanish conquest. Very powerful interests at the highest social, economic, political, and ecclesial levels had no desire to embrace the new mission of the church to transform the world in the direction of the Kingdom of God. Three of the 5 bishops in El Salvador, including the military vicar, opposed any social involvement by the Church if such involvement sided with the poor.

¹It was also the theological justification for societal structures that oppressed for centuries (Proaño: 8).

The resistance to Vatican II and its consequences began under Archbishop Chavez and continued, even deepened under Archbishop Romero. Rutilio, therefore, was confronted with the status quo: a church that had allied itself with the wealthiest landowners for over 350 years and in which a majority of the leadership preferred to maintain the status quo. A statement during the civil war by peasant Don Lito sums it up perfectly. Speaking about his local priest in the 1980s he said:

There was another issue that he was constantly giving us guidance on: resignation. The grandmothers, the old men, the boys and girls, were always going to the priest with their problems, to see what suggestions he could offer: “Padre, my house burned down,” “Padre, my cow strangled itself,” “Padre, I don’t have work,” “Padre, my wife is sick and I don’t have any money.” Then, drawing on what he’d heard in confessions, he would go and give advice. When he got to homilies he gave from that famous pulpit, he always said, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” “Blessed are those who weep, for they shall be comforted . . .”

And so you’d say to yourself: it really is quite important to be poor; it’s a privilege to be poor, right? And that’s just what we believed. The priest also said: “Blessed are the poor, because while they have suffering and sorrow in this life, they’ll have joy in the next life. Because when you suffer in patience, my beloved sons and daughters, God is taking note of all your sufferings, and he doesn’t miss anything. And when you reach the house of the Lord, on the day of your death, he’s going to send the choirs and angels and the blessed Virgin to bring you, and they’re going to lift you up and put you on a throne that’s already made and waiting for you. Because every one of you there is already in a special place in the kingdom of heaven.”

“On the other hand, my beloved sons and daughters,” I remember he would say “never desire what others have, because that is bad. Because, look, covetousness is bad, my beloved sons and daughters. He who covets will not be saved. You must accept what God gives. Because God already knows who he wants to give to, and who he doesn’t want to give to. And if he hasn’t given us anything, he knows why. Because if now you’re a bunch of drunks, if you gamble your money even now, when you’re poor, what would you be like, beloved sons and daughters, if you had money? You’d be big drunks, you’d be spendthrifts. You’d go around ruining lots of people. But God knows that, depriving you of that opportunity, so you’ll stay in your homes, calm and peaceful, just as God desires. . .” (Vigil: 30-31).

It is clear from this that the church in El Salvador and at least some priests at this time preferred “an institutional, sacramentalist view of the Church’s role, with a corresponding respect for established political authority and its ecclesiastical partners in the church hierarchy” (Montgomery: 68). The question for Rutilio became how to respond to the status quo in light of the new and progressive lines of Vatican II.

Upon becoming a Jesuit and returning from training in Europe to engage his own social and ecclesial context, Rutilio could choose from a variety of methods for engaging his social

reality. One method popular among the Jesuits of his own Province was called the “political option.” Another method was called the “religious option.” The difference between these methods was not their result, but their starting point and the perception of each starting point by those outside the church. Both approaches have been used throughout Latin America in the pastoral work of the church, but for concrete contextual reasons, Rutilio preferred to begin in the explicitly “religious” version (Grande: 20).

The “political option” meant that the ministry of the church would begin with an analysis of the social situation (usually through the lens of Marxism) and an embrace of political options to remedy that situation. This engagement in the political would be justified by faith and scripture, but the political would lead and the political would determine actions. This “political” version used Marxist analysis and was termed by the Bishops themselves as “liberation,” which began from an analysis of societal structures and a call for their transformation in light of the faith. Conversely, the religious option, for Rutilio, began with an attempt to enter into the reality of the oppressed and poor, but to allow the Word of God to free people from their psychology of oppression. There *were* immediate political consequences with this option, but they would follow, that is, be determined by the religious option. The pastoral goals of the Jesuit mission team led by Rutilio was reflected in their stated goal: “Evangelization in order to recreate a Church of living communities of new people, pastoral agents conscious of their human vocation who become promoters of their own destiny and who bring change to their reality along the lines of Vatican II and Medellín” (Grande: 2). In order for this to happen, the old religious order had to be subverted. Rutilio describes the religious consciousness he encountered in the following:

The priest has some knowledge and magical powers with which he is able to manipulate everyone. God is a capricious king with whom we must be content. His will is blamed for all that exists and happens and is something with which “we must still comply in all things.” To Him they go for certain needs and at certain times, like a pharmacy or a benefactor.

Religiously predominant in the rural areas is traditionalism, magic, individualism, the rites of passage and fatalism. One lives the religious sphere through alienating traditions. Their Christianity is nothing more than semi-magical devotions, without content, with some peripheral and confused notions highlighted by a great pastoral abandonment and the absence of almost any evangelization (14-15).

The first move made by the missionary team in these rural villages, all of which were Catholic, was to separate “money from sacraments.” This was emphasized in order to undo the influence that the “wealthy” had over priests in this areas. The second step was to give the people a copy of the New Testament, whether they could read or not. Unfortunately, at the time of Rutilio’s ministry, 50% of the Salvadoran population over the age of 10 was illiterate. For this reason, the mission team advocated literacy campaigns as a way of making sure people could read scripture without an intermediary. Where illiteracy was high, communal readings of scripture would suffice. Later in his ministry, Rutilio encouraged communities to act out the Gospels using contextual characters to drive home the meaning of a given parable. Rutilio’s ministry began with an effort to read the Bible with the people

(*not for the people*), and to guide them toward an understanding of particular scripture texts that would point to a response to their own problems. A quote from his article describes the beginning of this process:

The large community session began with a variety of songs that reinforced the goals of the mission. Next, a copy of the New Testament was given to any who wished to receive it, even if they could barely read. The team searched the New Testament and highlighted texts which were directly relevant to the problems and challenges in the community, gleaned from the anthropological data gathered. Certain texts were read out loud – sometimes two or three times – by both women and men. The large group then divided up into smaller groups of 8–10 people and they named three people for very specific jobs. The first job assigned was the reader, who reads the text verse by verse. The second job given was the animator who encouraged and moderated participation in the small group. The third job designated was the reporter who wrote down a list the group compiled. The goal in the small group activity was maximum participation from everyone (5).

Communal sessions of reading the Bible included the meaning of scripture framed in terms of the people’s personal, inter-personal, and social reality. At the conclusion of two-week sessions of biblical reading, learning, and applying scripture to reality, the community itself was asked to elect its own leaders, who were identified by their participation throughout the process. The community election was a central part of the direct mission period, and the criteria for the election was clear: “service, commitment, initiative, responsibility, sacrifice for others, and availability” (Grande: 8). The community suggested leaders, those named indicated their willingness to serve, and, finally, leaders were chosen by a majority of those present. Following their election, leaders were designated as “Delegates of the Word of God in service to the community” (Grande: 8). They were formally accepted and commissioned as “ministers” by the Archbishop during a liturgy in which *they* gave the homily. The community’s call to service is essential to understanding ministry. “Ministry begins with the Christian community, flows out of the Christian community, and nourishes and expands the community (O’Meara: 146-48)²

Two consequences were immediately evident from this approach following the conclusion of the first year of the mission. Rutilio expressed them in the following bullet points:

- “Great discovery of the Gospel by themselves: ‘we are now removing ignorance . . .’ ‘We were in the dark . . .’ An appetite for the Word has been opened and they comment and make it applicable in their own way.”
- “The Gospel and the situation in which they live come together quickly: ‘we are bringing the Gospel from the spiritual to the material’” (10).

² O’Meara argues, convincingly, that being called by a community is one critical aspect of what is termed “ministry” (146-48).

When the Gospel worldview replaced superstition and fatalism, the “magical consciousness” of the people evaporated in favor of a view of reality with explanations, including causes and effects (Grande: 11). With this little bit of knowledge and control of their own context, the people grew in confidence. Now they perceived themselves as more than simply victims of unknown external forces. No longer was the “will of God” allowed to justify pain, suffering, or unjust social or political structures. From this came the realization that perhaps things can change! This change does not come from individual effort alone but from a strong community of faith united in pursuit of the common good and deeply formed by the Word of God. All religious action was now oriented, not toward repetition or the fulfillment of personal cultic obligation, but rather toward humanizing change, commitment to others, and a dynamism toward the kingdom.

In all cases, the Gospel was never reduced to one political program over another, though leading with the Gospel clearly had political consequences. Living in this tension characterized the life and ministry of Rutilio. The fear of reductionism here was a warning to not reduce the Catholic faith to specific and concrete political action of a particular kind – a simplistic mistake made by both the far-right and far-left wings of the political spectrum (Grande: 21). The far-right made the fight against communism a direct translation of the Catholic faith, while the far-left did the same with its condemnation of the oligarchy and capitalist oppression. In *both* cases faith was reduced and enslaved by external political forces in favor of very specific actions.

Rutilio’s response to this reductionism was to put Christ and the Gospel back in the center of evangelizing – even when there were concrete political dimensions for doing so. Thus he stated, “The prophetic ministry will be that which proclaims, provokes, accompanies, confirms, presides, celebrates, and verifies faith in Christ and his Gospel as bearers of a dynamism of values able to lead to a new heaven and a new earth, through a different society of human communities, new and free people. This is the horizon for which we want to create the conditions of possibility under the constant goals and objectives mentioned above” (16-17). One of the first aspects of this proclamation to understand was how the mission team understood and lived out its own priestly ministry.

As with everything else in the church following Vatican II, priests and their roles shifted and some adapted to a new reality, a new ecclesial vision, and a new engagement with the world. Rutilio and his team of priests were no different, and their particular challenge of priestly identity was contextual as well. What they wanted, and needed, was a priestly identity somewhere between the two extremes that seemed to represent the polarization of the church over its new role. On the one side were priests who only performed sacraments and who kept what was considered the “faith” removed from social, economic, and cultural challenges facing their people. On the other side were priests committed almost exclusively to political work with little or no emphasis on evangelization, catechesis, or sacramental integration. As Rutilio put it, “Between the priest who only performs sacraments and the priest who only works in politics, there is a spectrum of priests for everyone. Between these two extremes we tried to find our position” (17).

What followed was a nuanced theological argument about the role of priests and their relationship to their communities in light of Vatican II. “Derived from the prophetic-

priestly-kingly character of the people of God, the presbyterate (priesthood) is ordained to serve with ministers of the Word, through worship and animation, charisms instituted by God for the community and mediated by it. Just as with both Jesus and the Apostles, these ministers highlight the prophetic service of evangelization. If anything, we should be ‘professionals’ in the manner of Christ, Paul, etc. in the ministry of the Word” (Grande: 17).

This summary of priestly identity is interesting for a number of reasons. First, the priest does not exist as a reality apart from a community; a priest is always a priest of a community and in a community. The gifts of ordination emerge from the *people of God*, in their role as prophet, priest, and king. The charisms of worship and animation, or critical roles of leadership within the community are given by God to the community (not solely the priest) and mediated by the community (not solely the priest). The model for this is the New Testament, especially Jesus and Paul, who proclaimed the Good News and its significance in a prophetic manner, for a particular people, in a particular place and time. This ministry of the Word thus requires a priest who both evangelizes in terms of content and applies this content *prophetically* in his context. In this way, both pure sacramentalism and pure political activism are avoided.

The pastoral reality of Rutilio was complex, and after a year in these communities, he shared some results. Nearly everyone claimed membership in Christianity through baptism, but nearly all lacked evangelization, the ongoing education and integration of faith into daily life in a meaningful way. After the first stage of the mission, Rutilio estimated that a group of between twenty and twenty-five thousand were without evangelical impact. Around five thousand people had questions, while two thousand considered the Gospel “important.” In the end, he identified about only four hundred as “committed” in some way. Rutilio summarized his pastoral-evangelical vision:

As our people are in the center of the coordinates between God and world, time and history, we can affirm with the language conscious of Paulo Freire, that the great majority have an immersed or quasi-immersed consciousness, magical and intransitive of their reality, from which they cannot distance themselves in order to objectify and criticize that reality. This reality dominates and crushes the human being who becomes an object rather than a subject and ruler. This person does not make history and without being this maker of history, they can hardly be liberated. Only a small number of people have an emerging consciousness or are in transition to one, even if it is naïve; they are being evicted of their oppressors – king, priest, God – there is a widening of the horizon of perception and awareness that the problems of the world raise, but their consciousness is not easily manipulated nor does it have the capacity to respond. They will be the subject of their own liberation and begin to make history. It is the man in Exodus who is very appropriate to receive the Easter message from the New Man, brother of human beings and Lord of history and the universe. These will be those who are able to build a new, open society in which there is room for the word and for criticism, for dialogue and responsibility, to be the managers of their own destiny and creators of history (15).

The goal for Rutilio and the mission team was to translate their vision into the context of El Salvador. They did so by making what they called, “an option for Christ and his message.” The problem was not that there was *no* Christianity among the people they served; rather, what was problematic was the *kind* of Christianity that was present. Baptismal commitments were only “something general.” Even those advanced in the faith had “no global vision or even a minimum scheme within which to anchor their faith.” Christ and Christianity were “reduced to a series of topics or recipes with a general commitment to the better; the expressions of Christian life are nothing more than moralizing or a tangential encounter with Christ and the Gospel” (16). What was necessary and urgent was a different approach grounded in Scripture and the tradition.

The mission to evangelize was transposed as “going to all the peoples of the parish to make present the reign of God.” This began with the *kerygma*: “to opt for Jesus, this is the evangelization to re-Christianize.” There were three “moments” in that kerygmatic option. The first was the moment of “*metanoia* or change of personal attitude toward the Kingdom.” The second moment was “*koinonia*: to make a community of faith; this is catechetical-liturgical evangelization.” The third moment was “*diakonia*: a commitment to change the world, this is the evangelization of actual experience” (Grande: 18).

How Rutilio and the mission team understood the relationship between these three moments was *very* important. They thought that in both the community of faith moment (*koinonia*) and in the commitment to change moment (*diakonia*), “we should put an emphasis on the beginning of all evangelization: the *metanoia* or change of personal attitude toward the Kingdom” (16). Rutilio’s rationale was important, especially given the highly politicized environment at the time, just prior to the civil war in El Salvador. “If the insistence was solely on community or toward promoting change, it could become politicized, and that Christianity ran the risk of being weak because of a weak base” (18). There will always be a political dimension of faith, that is a given, but when faith becomes “politicized,” it is used merely for political ends by external forces who may not be sympathetic to any personal faith dimension.

I conclude by quoting, once again, Don Lito, the Salvadoran peasant, as he recalls how people reacted to having access to the Bible and to priests who wanted to read it with them:

And then one day the priest said to us: “Wouldn’t you like to talk about the Bible some day? You’ve already told me that you met with the other priest. So you could do it for me. Who’s interested?”

“I am! I am!” said a few of us.

Inspired by the first ones who said yes, more and more said they were interested, too. And he began to go over the Bible with us. He read from the fifth chapter of the letter of James, the criticism of the rich and all that.

“Oh, is that in the Bible?” we asked, without really believing it.

“Sure. Look, you can understand this if you see that you’re children of God and that Christ came as the son of a poor woman and . . .”

And he began to put this question of “the poor” into our heads.

I remember it well. It was then we began to realize that it wasn't sinful to speak badly of the rich, since God was condemning them right there in the Bible. And if God was condemning them, how is it that God has made them and blessed them with money, and yet in the Bible he was condemning them? So we began to feel a great inner contradiction. And also we had disagreements among ourselves because we still hadn't quite caught on to this thing. Some of us began to lean in one direction, and some in another. We were taking positions (Vigil: 38-39).

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